



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn

**Park Street
Denbigh
Denbighshire
LL16 3DR**

Date of inspection: May 2024

by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

This report is also available in Welsh.

About Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn

Name of provider	Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn
Local authority	Denbighshire County Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Maintained Special
Religious character	None.
Number of pupils on roll	133
Pupils of statutory school age	107
Number in nursery classes	
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Maintained Special is 46.8%)	37.0%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 100.0%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	3.2
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	2.4
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2021
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/07/2016
Start date of inspection	13/05/2024
<p>Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn is a local authority special school maintained by Denbighshire County Council. The school provides day and residential placements for pupils aged 3 to 19 with autism. Pupils are drawn from the whole of Denbighshire as well as from neighbouring local authorities across the North Wales region.</p>	

The school is based on three sites in the town of Denbigh. There are 62 pupils of secondary school age at the main site, 37 pupils at the primary setting and 25 secondary-aged pupils with more complex needs at Ty'r Ysgol. The residential provision is situated alongside Ty'r Ysgol.

All pupils have statements of special educational needs or Individual Development Plans. Nearly all pupils have English as their home language. Around 42% of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

Since late 2021, the school has been engaged in discussions with the local authority to rationalise provision into a single site and to extend the capacity to meet need.

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Overview

Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn is a nurturing school with an inclusive ethos. Staff build trusting relationships with pupils. They know their pupils well and generally adapt approaches skilfully to meet the needs of pupils. Over time, many pupils develop into confident and happy learners.

Many pupils develop a range of important skills that support their learning and well-being effectively. Over time, many pupils make strong progress in developing their social and emotional skills. In relation to their individual starting points, many learners meet their personal targets. These skills prepare them successfully for progression to their next steps in life and learning. However overall, pupils' ability to write at length is underdeveloped, mainly due to a lack of structured opportunities to do so.

The quality of the teaching at the school is inconsistent. In the minority of lessons where teaching is most effective, teachers deliver highly engaging learning experiences and provide activities that are based within authentic learning contexts. Many teaching staff intervene and challenge pupils appropriately and sensitively to ensure that they continue to engage with tasks at a pace that is appropriate for the individual. In a few cases, where teaching is less effective, pupils tend to be passive for too long during lessons or are provided with tasks that do not inspire or challenge them.

The headteacher provides purposeful and calm leadership. The relatively new senior leadership team are passionate and committed to the school and its pupils.

The school's use of first-hand information to inform strategic planning is underdeveloped, and the information that the school does have is not collated to inform whole-school areas for improvement well enough.

Recommendations

- R1 Address the safeguarding issues raised during the inspection
- R2 Improve the quality and the consistency of teaching
- R3 Improve the planning and the provision for pupils' literacy skills
- R4 Strengthen the arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will work with the local authority to review the school's progress.

Main evaluation

Learning

During their time at the school, many pupils develop a range of important skills that support their learning and well-being effectively. In relation to their individual starting points, many learners meet their personal targets. These skills prepare them successfully for progression to their next steps in life and learning.

Over time, many pupils make strong progress in developing their social and emotional skills. For example, in lessons they settle quickly, learn to listen and follow instructions and routines successfully. They take turns and co-operate with teaching staff and with each other. Pupils listen well to their peers when following instructions to construct models. Many pupils communicate politely to visitors at the school. Further, a few pupils show sensitivity to their peers when discussing issues around bullying in their previous schools.

Many pupils, with the support of staff, generally use communication systems that are appropriate to them including symbols and signs. For example, younger pupils use symbols successfully to communicate food choices in breakfast club. Over time, pupils become increasingly confident in expressing their needs, feelings and choices. They make valued contributions both in answering questions and during discussions. For example, a few pupils discuss the reasons for the differences in the northern and southern Aurora lights. Where appropriate, and when pupils are able to, they engage willingly, maturely and confidently in extended and meaningful conversations, for example when sharing their ideas for their aspirations for the future.

Many pupils develop and improve their reading skills appropriately. For example, pupils recognise and understand symbols and signs to indicate their choice of activities. A few pupils, where appropriate to their needs, apply effective reading strategies when accessing reading comprehension tasks such as finding information about the battle of Hastings. In addition, a few pupils choose their reading material and express their opinions with enthusiasm.

Overall, the standard of writing across the school is variable. Younger pupils improve their letter formation and legibility. For example, they practise mark making and letter formation through a range of different multi-sensory approaches. Many pupils can spell words correctly and compose short sentences successfully. For example, they write short sentences about the impact that humans have on planet earth. The majority of pupils write for a variety of different purposes and audiences suitably. A few pupils, for example, write extended pieces of writing such as biographies of Welsh celebrities and use similes and metaphors to write evocative descriptions of scenes in nature. However, overall, pupils' ability to write at length is underdeveloped.

Pupils use their developing numeracy skills suitably in a range of meaningful contexts. Generally, they have a secure grasp of number concepts. For example, pupils use mental calculations to work out how many more class reward points they need to collect in order to achieve their target. Many pupils develop measuring skills

effectively, for example when recording the temperature in various parts of the school building. They begin to draw suitable conclusions from the data they have collected.

Many pupils practise their information and communication technology (ICT) skills appropriately to support their well-being and learning across the curriculum. For example, many pupils use software packages independently to practise reading and spelling skills. Over time and where appropriate, pupils have developed appropriate skills to access, complete, save and retrieve online learning materials. Further, a few communicate their ideas suitably using digital methods, for example by writing notes on shared documents to offer suggestions of adjectives to enhance a piece of writing.

Most pupils develop their creative skills well. During a music therapy session, pupils are confident and competent in playing the piano and drums to accompany a vocalist. Many pupils create attractive paintings and collages of animals from the rainforest and draw striking chalk patterns on the school playground. Most pupils enjoy a range of physical activities, which include rock climbing, riding bikes and trikes and canoeing.

Many pupils make worthwhile progress in developing their independence skills, particularly in areas that have relevance to their daily lives. For example, younger pupils use communication boards to communicate their needs and preferences and collect equipment from their play boxes at lunchtime. Older pupils learn to prepare healthy snacks independently.

By the time they leave school, nearly all pupils gain relevant accreditation and qualifications in a suitable range of areas to support their transition to the next stage of their lives. This offer includes awards and accreditation in areas such as essential skills, money management, music and musicians of Wales and health and safety in the workplace.

Over the last three academic years, most pupils leaving the school progressed into education, training or employment.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Pupils develop strong and trusting relationships with staff. This supports them to know where to turn to for support and guidance. Pupils are treated fairly and with respect. Pupils are safe in school and say that they are free from bullying and verbal and physical harm.

Nearly all pupils benefit from, and respond positively, to the well-established and consistent routines across the school. Pupils are polite and courteous, and many are keen to communicate to visitors about their positive experiences at school. They are respectful towards each other, members of staff, and visitors to the school. Over time, most pupils learn to understand and regulate their emotions. As a result, the behaviour of nearly all pupils across all sites is exemplary.

Most pupils settle to tasks quickly and engage in work independently, or with support when required. They respond well to positive praise and feedback. Most pupils are proud of their work and achievements and develop a positive attitude to learning. Most pupils engage well in their learning, respond enthusiastically during lessons and

sustain concentration to complete their tasks. Over time, most pupils develop their resilience well.

Where appropriate, many pupils work well together in pairs and small groups. They play well together at break times, for example learning to share when using wobble boards, spinning platforms and basketball hoops, and they take turns when playing games. A minority of pupils are beginning to develop their independent living skills. However, pupils' skills in this area are under-developed.

Many pupils across the school engage enthusiastically in a range of worthwhile leadership roles. Pupils take their leadership roles seriously and actively engage in, for example, the school council and eco committee. They make useful suggestions which bring about improvements to the school, for example extending the range of playtime equipment. These experiences give pupils a voice, which in turn has a positive impact on their self-esteem and self-worth and helps them feel valued.

Many pupils are developing their understanding of fairness, equity and sustainability, through various fund-raising activities. For example, they collect crisp packets from pupils across the school to donate to a charity that recycles these to make blankets for the homeless. The range of pupil voice opportunities supports pupils well to develop into ethically informed citizens.

Most pupils improve their attendance over time. However, the attendance rates of a few pupils remain too low. The school has recently identified improving attendance as an area for improvement.

Many pupils participate in a range of beneficial enrichment activities during lunchtimes, which contributes effectively to their engagement, well-being and social skills, for example film club, football, games club and music club.

Most pupils are happy in school and enjoy their school experiences. They speak enthusiastically about trips and visitors to the school and enjoy experiences such as taking part in sporting events and the national Eisteddfod.

Most pupils enjoy participating in physical activities. Where appropriate these experiences help pupils understand how to keep healthy and live a healthy lifestyle. Pupils enjoy participating in PE lessons and playing on the playground equipment at lunch and break times where they develop their coordination and balance. A few pupils benefit from taking part in sporting events, such as disability sports tournaments. For example, and where appropriate, pupils know that taking part in regular exercise and eating a balanced diet is important. As a result, they are developing into healthy, confident individuals.

Teaching and learning experiences

Across the school staff have established positive working relationships with their pupils. Staff know their pupils well. This helps to ensure that pupils are ready to learn, for example by greeting pupils as they come into school and lessons.

There is a calm approach to managing transitions, which ensures that nearly all pupils are ready to engage in their learning. Where appropriate staff provide a structured programme of routine movements that enable pupils to self-regulate.

In the minority of lessons where teaching is most effective, teachers deliver highly engaging learning experiences and provide activities that are based within authentic learning contexts, for example creating products to sell at their own garden centre after visiting one in the local area. As a result, pupils approach their learning with enthusiasm and a genuine curiosity.

Where teaching is most effective, staff use communication systems and visual structures effectively to support pupils to become more independent learners.

In the strongest examples, teachers deliver sequences of lessons that build upon pupils' skills well. For example, teachers provide pupils with valuable opportunities to practise using different features of writing before applying their skills to write at length.

Many teaching staff intervene and challenge pupils appropriately and sensitively to ensure that they continue to engage with tasks at a pace that is appropriate for the individual. In a few cases, where teaching is less effective, pupils tend to be passive for too long during lessons or are provided with tasks that do not inspire or challenge them. These teachers tend to rely too much on writing frames and worksheets that hamper pupils' opportunities to respond freely to tasks or to write at length.

Across the school, the majority of teaching staff provide pupils with useful verbal and visual feedback. In the strongest examples, pupils are provided with clear verbal and written feedback, which provides next steps in learning.

Generally, support staff develop important, nurturing working relationships with pupils. They are effective in supporting pupils in their learning during lessons and as they move around the school. They know and understand the needs and interests of pupils well. They provide valuable and positive support to pupils, often using their professional skills to adapt learning to suit the needs of pupils.

Numeracy and digital skills coordinators are beginning to provide useful guidance for teachers to assist them to plan suitable opportunities for pupils to apply their skills in their work across the curriculum. However, overall, the planning for the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills over time is in its infancy.

Leaders ensure that the curriculum is broad and balanced and reflects the needs of nearly all pupils well. There is a strong ethos of putting pupils' needs at the heart of the curriculum and developing relevant, purposeful skills for life. Older pupils have access to a suitable range of accredited courses and skills-based qualifications. Where appropriate, the school maintains useful links with other providers, such as their local secondary school to provide a few pupils with bespoke options. The school's curriculum meets the principles of Curriculum for Wales appropriately.

The curriculum actively and successfully promotes the Welsh language and culture across the school. For example, nearly all pupils benefit from opportunities to compete in Urdd competitions and the school has recently achieved the silver award of the Siarter Iaith.

The school offers a wide range of beneficial extra-curricular activities, such as attending a local woodland centre, chess club and a school band.

Care, support and guidance

Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn is a nurturing school with an inclusive ethos. Staff build trusting relationships with pupils. They know their pupils well and generally adapt approaches skilfully to meet the needs of pupils. Over time many pupils develop into confident and happy learners.

The school has a well-established inclusion team of highly skilled staff, which includes behaviour support, speech and language specialists and intervention support staff. The team makes an invaluable contribution to the well-being of pupils. For example, working closely with the communication team, they provide a range of extensive high-quality training and support in communication and behaviour to all staff across all sites. This is having a very positive impact on the progress of nearly all pupils, for example, in improving their communication skills and developing their strategies to support self-regulation. Overall, this is a particularly strong feature of the work of the school.

The school provides a broad range of beneficial interventions and these support pupils well in developing a range of valuable skills, for example in recognising and understanding social cues, improving their well-being and developing their literacy skills. In addition, pupils are supported in developing a better understanding of their emotions, the emotions of others and how best to respond to these. Overall, for those that receive these interventions, this support is having a positive impact on their confidence and outcomes.

Individual development plan processes and the associated additional learning provision support pupils' well-being and learning well. The school has developed valuable milestones to support pupils in achieving small steps in learning. Person centred practice is well developed. Pupils enjoy reflecting on their progress during review meetings and make sensible suggestions for areas to improve. Parents and carers value the opportunity to discuss their child's progress with the range of professionals in attendance.

Leaders have developed robust processes to evaluate the progress pupils make towards achieving their planned outcomes. They have implemented a range of useful systems to track and monitor pupil progress. As a result, they have a secure understanding of the progress pupils make across the school and use this information well to inform planning and decision making.

The school delivers a robust personal and social education (PSE) curriculum within the health and well-being area of learning. Further, the school has worked successfully with parents and carers to deliver a tailored relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum, which meets the needs of pupils well. This is a notable feature.

The school's curriculum provides pupils with suitable opportunities to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through an appropriate range of contexts. For example, in lessons, pupils define bullying and its impact on emotional health and well-being. They develop tolerance and learn to respect each other's unique skills and qualities. The school has appropriate arrangements for collective

worship, which enables pupils, for example, to reflect, explore their feelings and discuss values such as friendship.

The school has strong and effective relationships with a range of partners. These are used to good effect to enhance the curriculum and support the additional learning and safeguarding needs of pupils.

The school builds successful relationships with parents. Parents appreciate the regular and effective communication from the school and know how well their child is doing. Parents benefit from a range of regular events and workshops provided by the school. This helps them, for example, to understand and support their child's sensory and communication needs.

Systems to monitor and manage pupils' attendance are robust and are successful in increasing overall rates of attendance in each of the past three years.

There is a very strong safeguarding culture at the school. The school's safeguarding guidelines and procedures are comprehensive, and all staff know their responsibilities for keeping pupils safe whilst at school. Clear and consistent processes for managing handover periods at the start and end of the day are effective.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has a strong vision and moral commitment to further develop and strengthen the school's provision to support pupils' well-being. Well-being and care, support and guidance are particularly strong features of the work of the school.

The headteacher provides purposeful and calm leadership. The relatively new senior leadership team are passionate and committed to the school and its pupils. The assistant headteachers oversee the day-to-day running of the different sites and have an appropriate spread of whole-school responsibilities that they undertake efficiently. Middle leaders have responsibility for the planning of the curriculum across the school. The curriculum is broadly appropriate, and the school is developing the role of middle leaders. It is too early therefore to fully judge the impact of their work.

The school has appropriate arrangements for the performance management of teachers and appraisals for teaching assistants. Performance management objectives link closely to the professional standards for both teachers and teaching assistants, and link also to priorities in the school development plan.

The governing body generally has a secure understanding of the school, its strengths and areas for development. The headteacher and other leaders across the school provide useful updates to governors on the work of the school. These reports do not always focus well enough on informing governors about the quality of teaching or the progress that pupils make during their time at the school.

Where possible, the governing body looks to appoint governors with a range of skills and experiences that are then matched well to areas of the school's work, for example in safeguarding and health and safety. There are an appropriate range of sub-groups and designated governors for different aspects of the school's work.

Governors appreciate the opportunities to meet with leaders, staff and pupils, and they gain considerable insight from these meetings. Leaders too appreciate the enquiring discussions.

The school's budget is in deficit. There is no clear plan on how the school will reduce the deficit and this impacts on the school's ability to drive improvements. For example, this limits the governing body's capacity to make permanent appointments at the school.

The Ty'r Ysgol site provides dedicated support for pupils with autism who have complex needs. However, the configuration of the building and the limited suitable areas for pupils to self-regulate their emotions present challenges for staff to fully support the pupils' needs in a safe environment.

The school's use of first-hand information to inform strategic planning is underdeveloped, and the information that the school does have is not collated to inform whole-school areas for improvement well enough. Staff have recently become more involved in self-evaluation arrangements. However, the understanding that staff have of the school's improvement priorities is variable. The school's evaluation of its strengths and areas for improvement does not capture the variability in the quality of teaching or the health and safety concerns raised by inspectors.

The school's improvement priorities are broadly appropriate and include useful updates on progress. However, it is not always clear how self-evaluation activities directly inform improvement planning. Further, actions to secure improvements at pace are not clear, which makes it difficult for senior leaders to evaluate their progress in securing the necessary improvements. Overall, the school's improvement priorities do focus on the quality of teaching or on pupil progress well enough.

Staff have benefited from the recent initiative to observe colleagues on the other sites. They have found the professional dialogue rewarding. Leaders and staff have collaborated across the sites to develop the curriculum. Within the school, staff benefit from valuable opportunities provided by the local authority and the region to develop their leadership skills. However, professional development does not focus well enough on ensuring the consistency of teaching and learning strategies.

The school's use of the pupil development grant part funds the school's inclusion service. This service has a beneficial impact on the communication skills and well-being of pupils.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work, to listen to them read and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit a broad sample of classes, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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